

(SP) WHO IS AROUND TOP ATHLETES? OCCUPATIONS AND SPORTING PERFORMANCE ISSUES

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Introduction

In November 2004, an international conference was organised at the INSEP in Paris. It focused on the following topic "the analysis of top sporting performance within its context".

One of the main issues emerging was: which is the appropriate environment to be analysed and the right methods to be used? Although the scope of research studies is relatively developed in the micro environment of athletes, the effects of the "athlete's entourage" have not really been studied. A research study launched in 2004 by ONMAS⁸, has given an opportunity to explore this field with a double goal: to better understand the relationship between coaches and athletes and mainly to identify new needs for the coaches in occupational matters and training issues.

Methods

The aforementioned study was based on an interdisciplinary approach led by a team of researchers from INSEP and Orléans University, specialized in sociology, ergonomics, economics and law. The study was expected to give a new insight into the sporting performance domain as well as in the occupational one.

The ecological theories of occupations⁹ seemed to provide an interesting framework to analyse and understand the situations. Andrew Abbott has completed the concept of "the ecology of the occupations" and developed a new one "the linked ecological systems"¹⁰..

The study was based on a qualitative approach including the analysis of several case-studies. From a methodological point of view, the research study is focused on the athlete. Around 25 deep interviews and 34 short questionnaires with selected top level athletes in various individual sports have been done in order to provide the nearest view of reality.

Results

The study ended in November 2005 and some trends can be presented.

In a traditional vision the core of performance is the relationship between the athlete and the coach. In fact behind this vision reality is different. Two major processes can be found in the top sport performance area.

In a global vision there is a rationalization process which divides performance into several aspects, analyses each element and aims to bring an adapted response to each question. The consequence is a version of work division: an increase in the specialisation of the tasks and roles around the athlete. There are many activities or jobs such as psychologists, physiotherapists, nutritionists, counsellors, managers, lawyers ...

⁸ Observatoire National des Métiers de l'Animation Sportive; étude sur "les activités rémunérées et indemnisées autour du sportif de haut niveau". The report is available on www.onmas.org.

⁹ Abbott, A, 1988, *The System of Professions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ Abbott, A, *Ecologies liées*, in Menger, P.M., ed., p.30-50, *Les professions et leurs sociologies*, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris: INED, 2003.

In a local vision, there is a social phenomenon. The real entourage of the athlete is also the result of a personal, irrational, spontaneous, opportunistic process. Various opportunities are taken such as the new technologies, the friends, parents, the weakened boundaries of the organisations (clubs, teams, sport centres...) that give more flexibility and freedom. Out of a formal and an institutional approach, it appears that the entourage of the athlete is complex and it should be considered as an interaction between the players and the environment.

1. the entourage of each athlete is different even in the same sport
2. beside the coach other occupations are emerging in the environment of athlete.
Considering the evolution of professions, that means pioneers are investing the area. It is a first step before the recognition from public authorities, in particular by the State.
3. various models have been preliminarily defined and will be confronted to the case-studies:
"The athlete-coach relationship system", "the coach-hub system", "the athlete-hub system", "the multi-agent complexity". This last model appears to be the growing one.
4. even if there is a written contract between the governing bodies and each elite athlete, there is no exclusivity. The general rule is that any person may sign a binding contract. In fact, the juridical situations between an athlete and other people are more and more complex and look like an interminglement of contracts. Some soft law tools like code of behaviour, bargaining agreement could be useful to improve relationship between the various people around the athlete.

Discussion

The results raise questions about the effective top sport policy to be defined and implemented. In France the elite sport policies are led by the Ministry of Sports in cooperation with the federations (national governing bodies) and the NOC. The fundamental structure is the recognised top elite sport training centres named "pôles". In fact the "pôles" are not homogenous and one of the results of the research study shows that there is a need for a flexible organization to support an effective developing talent policy. In the future, will the vocational training of coaches have to be strengthened and broadened to integrate a wider range of skills or will the evolution and the division of the work irreversible and leads to create new job qualifications and certifications? A new study in 2006 about the real situation of work's national coaches shows that they act like head of High Performance Project. A new training challenge is open.

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